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TAGS: PREF PHUM IS EG SU
SUBJECT: DEMARCHE TO GOI ON SUDANESE REFUGEES

REF: A. STATE 103854 B. CAIRO 2195 C. CAIRO 170 D.
REFCOORD BROOKS-RUBIN JULY 18-24 EMAILS

Classified By: Classified By: POL/C Marc Sievers for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) (Summary) On July 30, Acting Regional Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) informed UNHCR/Israel's Head of Office and Honorary Liaison of the Department's wish to see UNHCR/Geneva take the lead in coordinating a response to the issue of Sudanese and other asylum seekers entering into Israel from Egypt. Embassy POLOFF delivered Ref A demarche to the GOI on August 7. Both UNHCR/Israel and GOE expressed concern that strained relations between UNHCR and GOE will hinder any mediatory role that UNHCR/Geneva could play on this issue. While the GOI expresses continued commitment to help find a multi-party solution to the plight of the asylum seekers, its apparent lack of confidence in the current ability of UNHCR to take the lead on this issue raises questions whether UNHCR/Geneva will be able to deliver the Egyptian clarifications and commitments that Israel seeks (Ref A) to implement their agreement with Cairo (Ref C) on dealing with this growing problem. (End Summary)

¶2. (C) On July 30, Acting Regional Refugee Coordinator (RefCoord) informed UNHCR/Israel's Head of Office Steve Wolfson and Honorary Liaison Michael Bavli of the Department's wish to see UNHCR/Geneva take the lead in coordinating a response to the issue of Sudanese and other asylum seekers entering into Israel from Egypt. RefCoord emphasized that, in the absence of a formal bilateral agreement between the governments of Egypt and Israel, UNHCR/Geneva's role would be to initiate discussions with both governments with the goal of formalizing an agreement that would address the border concerns of both countries, as well as the protection concerns of UNHCR. UNHCR's Bavli was unhappy with this message and repeated the request that a high-level USG official "simply pay a compliment" to Mubarak for reaching an agreement with Olmert, thereby "enhancing the chances" that the GOE will comply with the alleged terms of the Mubarak-Olmert agreement. Bavli also stated his belief that the Egyptian President has not relayed the terms of the Mubarak-Olmert agreement to members of his own government and underscored that Mubarak would be more likely to do so if a high-level USG interlocutor intervened. RefCoord reiterated the USG's concern about being seen as the guarantor of a bilateral agreement that it does not have the ability to enforce and pointed out that verbal assurances from the GOE to the USG would not likely be sufficient to allay UNHCR's protection concerns.

¶3. (C) Bavli also complained about UNHCR/Cairo's office, which he says has "terrible relations" with the GOE and "would do anything to undermine an agreement between the GOE and GOI." RefCoord pointed out that these factors, while

important to consider, do not detract from the conclusion that UNHCR/Geneva should have the overall lead in coordinating a response to this issue. Striking a more practical tone, Wolfson stated that the local UNHCR offices in Cairo and Tel Aviv would ultimately be responsible for implementing the terms of any agreement between UNHCR and the governments of Israel and Egypt.

¶4. (C) Bavli stated that, although Sudanese are still crossing into Israel at the rate of approximately 50-60 per day, the GOI has not yet deported anyone to Egypt and reiterated UNHCR/Israel's intent to interview every asylum seeker before the GOI begins deporting those with no valid refugee claims. Wolfson relayed his concern that UNHCR/Israel does not currently have the capacity to conduct RSDs for the Sudanese population resident in Israel and remarked that it will be difficult to carry out the aforementioned goal unless his office's capacity is quickly bolstered.

¶5. (SBU) On August 7, Embassy Refugee Officer informed MFA Deputy Director of International Organizations and Human Rights Simona Halperin of the Department's wish to see UNHCR/Geneva take the lead in coordinating a response to the issue of Sudanese and other asylum seekers entering into Israel from Egypt. Israeli concerns over "opening the floodgates" to tens of thousands of potential asylum seekers remain strong, but Halperin reiterated the GOI's commitment to help -- along with other interested nations -- find a humanitarian solution for these individuals. Halperin gave no indication of any progress, or expected progress, in receiving an Egyptian commitment on securing the border and assuring that Sudanese returned to Egypt by Israel will not be subsequently returned by Egypt to Sudan. Without a firm Egyptian commitment on these issues, Israel is very unlikely to implement its part of the Mubarak-Olmert agreement and resettle qualified Sudanese within Israel.

¶6. (C) Halperin also said that the strained relations between UNHCR/Cairo and the GOE reported by RefCoord extend to UNHCR/Geneva as well. The problem reportedly stems from an incident in December 2005 where Egyptian police forcibly removed protesters from UNHCR/Cairo, apparently at the request of UNHCR/Cairo, resulting in a number of deaths. The incident was portrayed in the media as a decision by the Cairo police, however, and the GOE believes that UNHCR/Cairo hid its role in calling for police assistance. Halperin explained that those hard feelings extend to UNHCR/Geneva as well, because the Egyptians feel that Geneva backed up UNHCR/Cairo's story and did not step forward to admit UNHCR's role in the incident. Until UNHCR does something to acknowledge its share of the responsibility for that incident, Halperin expressed doubt that UNHCR/Geneva would be able to successfully fill the role envisioned by the Department.

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JONES